

Dr Wayne Somerville
Mrs Susan Somerville

To the Committee Secretary
Senate Standing Committee on Rural Affairs and Transport
Inquiry into the Impact of Coal Seam Gas and Coal Mining

RE: Submission on the Social Impacts of Coal Seam Gas (CSG) Mining

I am writing to urge Committee members to carefully consider the profoundly detrimental social and community mental health impacts that will result if the CSG industry is allowed to forcibly and irrevocably change rural communities, the lifestyles of farming families, and land and water use in agricultural areas.

As a clinical psychologist I have worked for more than 30 years to improve the mental health of my local rural community. I am very alarmed at the rapidly developing social disruption, depression, anger, violence, and political chaos that the CSG industry appears determined to inflict on the Australian people.

It is perhaps difficult for people who live in cities to appreciate the seriousness of the impact that CSG mining has on farming families. It is not all right to set up a mining camp or a permanently lit, constantly noisy pumping station within sight or hearing of a farming family's house. The impact on farming families is every bit as distressing as it would be for an urban dweller if someone forcibly came into their backyard and set up a noisy and brightly lit pumping operation that ran day and night for years.

Farming families have to do without the services and conveniences of the town and city, and they pay a price in terms of relative disadvantages in health, income, and social isolation. But farming families are compensated for these negatives by their love of their land and being able to work in a rural environment that they protect and develop with their own resources and efforts.

The emotional and psychological impact of the CSG industry's unrestrained ruining of farming families' property, lifestyles and prospects for the future will inevitably result in predictable psychological responses. For too many, the loss will lead to anxiety, depression, and a host of other symptoms of mental disorders. Undoubtedly, some will suicide. But not everyone who suffers such losses perpetrated by uncaring others will respond by becoming depressed and withdrawn. Some will respond with anger, revenge and violence.

It seems to me that the debate over the impacts of the CSG industry has yet to properly address the rapidly growing threat of widespread violence, destruction of mining infrastructure and property, and serious social and political disruption.

We were around years ago when the protests at Terania Creek ignited a social and political movement that spread rapidly to forever change forestry law and management practice in Australia.

I fear that if the CSG industry is allowed to open up the Northern Rivers area of NSW to CSG mining by building a pipeline over the Border Ranges to Ipswich, many people will not just withdraw and become depressed. Instead, they will become angry and be tempted to vent that anger on CSG equipment and infrastructure.

Do politicians and CSG mining executives really think that they will be able to treat rural people with what will be perceived as callous disregard, and then expect that their millions of dollars of pumps, pipelines, and other equipment will survive unguarded in isolated rural areas?

I strongly urge the Committee to bring some reason, balance, and a sense of “a fair go” to a situation that threatens to get out of hand, with unpredictable and profoundly damaging consequences for the entire country.

There are times when governments have to override the rights of individuals for the greater good of the society, but this is not such a time. The CSG industry is like nothing that has ever been seen before in Australia. It is one thing for a local council or government to resume land for a fair compensation, but it is an entirely different situation when the rights of rural landholders and farming families across the country are violated en masse without proper consultation, consideration of their rights, or payment of fair compensation.

Surely “a fair go” means what it has always meant - that “fair and just” compensation be paid to any farming family for the effects of damage to their property, their loss of lifestyle and prospects, and the destruction of their right to the “quiet enjoyment” of the land they bought, pay rates and taxes on, and love. It seems inevitable that the ultimate costs of ignoring basic standards of equity and fairness for farming families will far outweigh any short-term royalties paid by mining companies.

I implore the members of the Committee to do whatever they can to spare the country that we all love the years of pain, sorrow and disruption that the uncontrolled CSG industry threatens to break across the land.

Please do not hesitate to contact me if you require further information or if I can in any way further assist the Committee with its inquiry.

Yours faithfully,

Dr Wayne Somerville